

August 14, 2014: TR: McNamara, Kennedy, Berlin and Nuclear Weapons

After our afternoon discussion about McNamara, President Kennedy, Berlin and nuclear use, I thought I would turn towards one view. So here are some relevant notes from Trachtenberg's *A Constructed Peace*, offered *not in the context of making an argument*, as, arising from our discussion today, I'm now inclined towards your view regarding Kennedy and McNamara; instead, I thought it might be clarifying to present an alternative perspective on the possible differences between the President and the Secretary of Defense on nuclear weapons, versus McNamara's argument that they were in agreement on no-first use.

[288] "Under Eisenhower, the threat of nuclear escalation was of course the ultimate basis of defense policy. But under Kennedy as well, the defense of NATO Europe continued to rest on America's ultimate willingness to accept a full-scale nuclear confrontation with the USSR. People like Secretary of Defense McNamara might have been inclined to think that nuclear escalation would for all intents and purposes be suicidal, that nuclear weapons were therefore good only for deterring their use by others, and that the West ultimately needed conventional forces strong enough to balance Soviet conventional power on their own. But Kennedy never saw things this way. In his view, a sizeable nuclear force could keep the Soviets from attacking Western Europe not matter what the conventional balance was...."

[291] "Kennedy discussed these issues repeatedly and in considerable detail with top military leaders. The basis conclusion to emerge was that once serious fighting had begun, the pressure to escalate really would be enormous. It might be possible for the enemy to prevent a relatively small force from moving, and if that force got into trouble it might be possible to send in a larger force to bail it out. But if an American force, especially a relatively larger force, was attacked and was in danger of being wiped out, the president could hardly stand by and allow that force to be destroyed. He would probably have little choice but to authorize the use of nuclear weapons locally to save that force."

[292] "Kennedy...agreed that once the battle was joined and the Soviets began to kill Americans on a major scale, the president could no longer hold back. "I suppose if we get involved in a war in Europe," he remarked during an August 1962 briefing on Berlin contingency plans, "we will have no choice but to use nuclear weapons." And as soon as nuclear weapons started to be used, the level of violence would almost certainly escalate very rapidly, as each side sought to destroy the enemy's nuclear forces as rapidly as possible. The president had been advised, as he himself noted, "that if I ever released a nuclear weapon on the battlefield I should start a pre-emptive attack on the Soviet Union as the use of nuclear weapons was bound to escalate and we might well get the advantage by going first." (see also p. 293-295).

In footnote 39 on p. 295, MT writes: "It should be noted...that the evidence is mixed and that this is a difficult issue to assess. For many years, I learned toward the idea that the president had at bottom opted for a strategy of bluff,

and that if forced to choose, he would have sacrificed Berlin rather than start a nuclear war...I now lean in the opposite direction. What struck me as decisive in this regard was Kennedy's behavior immediately before the Cuban missile crisis; this will be discussed at the end of this chapter."

TR note: I have to say, I'm not sure what exactly MT is referring to as decisive here in regard to President Kennedy's behavior immediately before the CMC. Will try to read this when I get back and perhaps write to MT. MT does note McNamara's opposition to nuclear use, but doesn't note his story of his agreement on this with the President, so I'm not sure if he even knows about it. Will write to him about this too.